

# Simon Says

Wisdom and Inspiration · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

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Simon's voice, when he was teaching, was short sentences. Short paragraphs. Sharp rules. The kind of advice he would fire down the phone at a young reporter who had just pitched him something clumsy. The pieces on this site are the long versions. These are the short ones. One-liners he used again and again. Rules that made it into every factsheet, every workshop, every grumpy email to a student.

Think of this as the index to the way he talked. If you want the argument behind any of these, the article making the case will be linked or easy to find from the site search.

## On journalism

"You cannot be a journalist if you're not curious. You can teach everything else. You cannot teach that."

"There are two rules. Don't make it up. Don't let anyone else make it up and pretend you didn't know."

"The story is the person. Never the subject. Never the topic. The person."

"Clippings are the only proof you're a journalist. Get some. Keep them. Send them."

"If you don't have a notebook in your pocket right now, you're not a reporter, you're just someone who thinks about it."

## On writing

"Every unnecessary word in a sentence is a small act of disrespect toward the reader."

"How many is 'a few'? How heavy is 'a big woman'? Write the number or don't write at all."

"The passive voice is the refuge of cowards and bureaucrats. Write what happened, not what was caused to be done."

"Show. Don't tell. If you have to tell me he was angry, you haven't done the work."

"Kill your adjectives. Kill most of your adverbs. What's left is the story."

"Never use a long word where a short one will do. Hemingway knew this. So do you. So use short ones."

## On selling

"Phone first. Send second. And for heaven's sake, GET OFF THE PHONE."

"Editors are busy. They are not your therapist. Be quick, be clear, be gone."

"Never send anything you wouldn't want read aloud at your funeral."

"If the editor says no, the next pitch goes in the next envelope. The rejection is over."

## **On life in the trade**

"The worst writing is always apologising for itself."

"Read everything. Watch everything. Listen to everything. Then write the thing that surprised you."

"You are only as good as the last piece. You are only as employable as the last clipping."

"Freelancing is lonely. Editors are not your friend, they are not your enemy, they are your customer."

"Learn to say no. Learn to say yes fast. Never take a week to say either."

## **On Wonder World**

"If it wouldn't interest Tom in Perth, we don't do the story."

"Kids know when you're talking down to them. Adults are slower to notice."

"The reporters made the show. Not me. The reporters."

## **The signoff**

"And remember, the world really is wonderful!"

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Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit [simontownsendjournalist.com](http://simontownsendjournalist.com) for the full archive.